

October 4, 1998 - January 3, 1999

Andersen Consulting is proud to sponsor the exhibition

More than a century after his death,
Vincent van Gogh has become a legend.
So many myths surround his name today
that his major place in the development
of modern art is often overshadowed.
Despite his turbulent life, Van Gogh pursued throughout his career a clear artistic
goal: to create images of great emotional
intensity based on a careful study of the
effects of color and composition.

Notwithstanding the clichés that endure in the popular imagination, Van Gogh was neither a mad genius, nor a starving, misunderstood artist. His art belonged to the avant-garde of his time, and as such was not accepted by the public at large; but Van Gogh had the support of an entire circle of friends, artists, and critics. He received financial help from his brother Theo, and by the end of his short career his paintings were exhibited in several major group shows in Paris and Brussels.

Most of the paintings in this exhibition remained in Van Gogh's family after his death and are now housed in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Among them are several key works from each phase of the artist's career, together with some less well-known paintings, providing an opportunity to rediscover the artist's creative range beyond his most familiar images.



no. 6. The Potato Eaters, April 1885

HOLLAND AND BELGIUM

Van Gogh was twenty-seven years old when he decided to become an artist, after unsuccessful attempts at being an art dealer, a teacher, and a clergyman. Although he attended a few drawing classes and received some instructions from a cousin, Van Gogh mostly taught himself art by studying prints and reproductions he collected. His early work, which includes rural landscapes, still lifes, and images of working peasants, is marked by a great sense of immediacy and a bold execution.

Van Gogh's first major painting, The Potato Eaters (no. 6) of 1885, reflects his ambition to be "a painter of peasant life." At the time the artist was living in the small village of Nuenen, in southern Holland, and found inspiration in the harsh experience of workmen and laborers, with whom he identified. Following standard academic practices, Van Gogh based his painting on more than forty studies of peasant heads and several sketches of the entire composition. Although the theme of the evening meal belongs to an established tradition that includes such biblical scenes as the Last Supper, Van Gogh's coarse treatment is unconventional. Emulating the French realist authors Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, whom he read avidly, Van Gogh eschewed sentimentality in his representation of country life. "What I have tried to do," he wrote, "is convey the idea that those people, eating their potatoes by lamplight, have dug the earth with the very



no. 18. A Pair of Shoes, 1885/1886

hands they put into their bowls." Hoping to make a career as a figure painter, Van Gogh left Nuenen in 1885 for Antwerp, where he briefly attended the academy. A few months later he suddenly decided to move to Paris.

PARIS

The two years Van Gogh spent in Paris, exposed to the recent trends of the French avant-garde, were crucial to his artistic development. A Pair of Shoes (no. 18), perhaps painted soon after his move, still shows the dark colors of his Dutch works. The frontal, close-up view of the wornout shoes—often interpreted as a symbolic selfportrait—also recalls the studies of peasant heads from the previous year. But Van Gogh's discovery of impressionism and postimpressionism, and the friendships he formed with artists such as Gauguin and Signac, led to a dramatic change in his palette and brushwork. Interested in color theories, Van Gogh began experimenting with the use of bright, pure colors to heighten the expressiveness of his work. By 1887 he had also adopted the broken brushstrokes of the impressionists in several views of Paris and the hill of Montmartre, where he lived.

With its vegetable gardens and windmills, Montmartre offered a conjunction of urban and rural elements that appealed to Van Gogh. In Vegetable Gardens and the Moulin de Blute-Fin on Montmartre (no. 25), he juxtaposed complementary hues—yellow and purple, blue and orange,



no. 25. **Vegetable Gardens and the Moulin de Blute-Fin on Montmartre,** 1887

green and red—throughout the painting, applying the principle that a color looks more intense when placed next to its complementary. In addition, he made the colors vibrate by combining the loose, spontaneous brushstrokes of the impressionists with the more regular hatchings and dots of Seurat's pointillism.

Another source of inspiration that Van Gogh explored in Paris, where japonism was then fashionable, was Japanese woodblock prints. He admired their bold designs, intense hues, and flat areas of unmodulated color. In 1887, he made paintings directly copied from Japanese prints, accentuating their color contrasts (no. 37). The



no. 37. The Courtesan, 1887

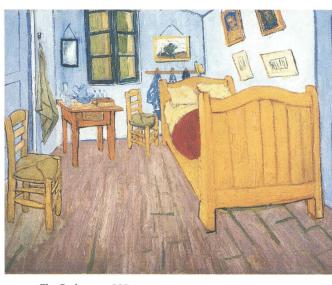
Japanese influence would remain strong throughout Van Gogh's work, finding its way in his use of daring perspectives and in the flat decorative patterns he often added to the background of his later portraits.

It was during his Parisian period that Van Gogh painted most of his self-portraits—mainly because he was unable to afford models. Their psychological intensity was deliberately sought after in an attempt to go beyond photographic resemblance. It was achieved through bold color contrasts and frank brushmarks that do not conceal their constructive role. Van Gogh also fashioned his own identity. In *Self-Portrait as an Artist* (cover) he does not wear a painter's smock, but what he described himself as "a blue peasant's blouse of coarse linen." The palette, with its display of unmixed bright colors, indicates the artist's association with the modern movement.

ARLES

Exhausted by the pressures of the urban environment and attracted to a simpler rural life and warmer climate, Van Gogh decided to move south. In February 1888 he left Paris for the small town of Arles, in Provence. In contrast to the varied and experimental production of the Paris years, the paintings Van Gogh created in Arles (some two hundred over a period of fifteen months) present a greater stylistic consistency. Renewing his contact with nature, Van Gogh painted steadily outdoors, recording the light-





no. 53. The Bedroom, 1888

filled blossoming landscape of spring in Provence. He adopted new types of compositions, such as the vast, open vista of *The Harvest* (no. 47), one of his favorite paintings. The wide range of yellow hues and the brilliance and density of color throughout the canvas evoke the blazing sun of summer over the fertile land.

In Arles, Van Gogh developed his ideas about the expressive value of color: "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily, in order to express myself forcibly." These ideas found direct application in a group of paintings he created to decorate the so-called Yellow House into which he moved in September 1888 and where he dreamed of founding an artists' colony. In The Bedroom (no. 53), for instance, the intense colors were intended to produce an image of "absolute restfulness." "It's just simply my bedroom, only here color is to do everything, and . . . is to be suggestive of rest or of sleep in general The shadows and the cast shadows are suppressed; it is painted in free flat tints like the Japanese prints."

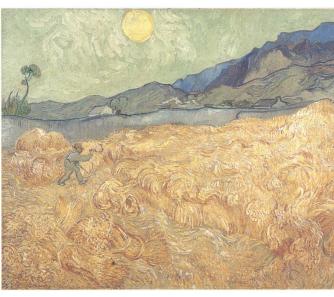
The artists' colony never materialized. Only Gauguin answered Van Gogh's invitation and came to Arles in the fall of 1888. For two months both artists shared their enthusiasm for brilliant colors, occasionally painting side by side. But conflicts of personality arose, compounded by Van Gogh's first breakdown (a result of some form of epilepsy), which led to his well-known mutilation of his ear and to Gauguin's departure.

Distraught by his condition, Van Gogh confined himself voluntarily to the mental hospital of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in May 1889.

SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE

Between his breakdowns, Van Gogh devoted himself to painting and drawing, with complete lucidity and in perfect control of his creative ability. In the confinement of his room he made copies after prints of old master paintings. He also painted scenes from his window and in the asylum garden. When he was well enough to venture outside he produced series of paintings of cypress trees, olive orchards, and the surrounding mountains. His palette became more subdued, with combinations of ocher, dark green, and blue.

Van Gogh's fascination with the sun persisted, however, as in *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (no. 58), to which he ascribed a symbolic meaning. "I see in this reaper—a vague figure fighting like the devil in the midst of the heat to get to the end of his task—I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping But there's nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold." This optimistic vision is brought home by Van Gogh's dynamic, swirling strokes of thick paint defining the wheat field, itself an image of the force of life in nature.



no. 58. Wheatfield with a Reaper, 1889



no. 70. Wheatfield with Crows, July 1890

AUVERS-SUR-OISE

After leaving Saint-Rémy, Van Gogh spent the last two months of his short life in Auvers-sur-Oise, some twenty miles north of Paris. This picturesque village, with its thatched cottages, had attracted many painters in the nineteenth century, from Corot and Daumier to Pissarro and Cézanne. Among the landscapes Van Gogh created in Auvers is a group of thirteen narrow horizontal canvases, perhaps intended as a decorative ensemble. One of them, Wheatfield with Crows (no. 70), has long been mistakenly thought to be Van Gogh's last painting, and as such has often been interpreted as a dark premonition of his suicide. Seen as one in a series of contrasting visions of the countryside shown under different skies, the painting appears less threatening, the visual echoes from one canvas to another suggesting instead an overall image of harmony. "I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words," wrote Van Gogh about some of these landscapes, "the health and restorative forces that I see in the country."

But Van Gogh's recurring crisis often prevented him from working. In a bout of depression the artist shot himself in July 1890, and he died two days later, at the age of thirty-seven. In the paintings he left he had expressed his deeper feelings through the most lucid combination of bright colors, bold compositions, and a rich handling of paint—thus setting the direction for many of the expressionist tendencies in twentieth-century art.

THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM

People must know that he was a great artist.

Theo van Gogh to his sister Lies, August 1890

Van Gogh sold only a handful of pictures during his lifetime. Upon his death, his works became the possession of his younger brother, Theo, an art dealer who had supported him morally and financially throughout his career. Theo died six months after Vincent, however, and responsibility for the paintings fell to his widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, who dedicated the rest of her life to promoting Van Gogh's art. Although she sold a number of paintings in order to spread knowledge of the artist, she kept many works representative of every phase of his career. Her son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, who inherited the collection in 1925, eventually placed it on loan to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In 1962, it was transferred to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation created at the initiative of the Dutch state.

Plans for the construction of a museum devoted to Van Gogh began and, in 1963, the Dutch modernist architect Gerrit Rietveld was commissioned to design it. The museum opened in 1973. In addition to some two hundred paintings, five hundred drawings, and seven hundred letters by the artist, it houses the works Van Gogh had received by exchange from his artist friends, and his collection of Japanese prints. It also includes a selection of nineteenth-century paintings, drawings, and prints by Van Gogh's predecessors and contemporaries. Now under renovation, the Van Gogh Museum is scheduled to reopen in May 1999, with a new wing designed by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa.



Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

CHRONOLOGY

1853

March 30: Birth of Vincent Willem van Gogh in Zundert in the southern province of North Brabant, in the Netherlands, the eldest son of Theodorus van Gogh, a pastor of the Dutch Reformed church.

1857

Birth of Vincent's brother, Theo.

1869

Begins working at the Hague gallery of the French art dealers Goupil & Cie.

1872

First letters to Theo. Van Gogh will write about seven hundred of them until his death.

1873

Transferred to the London branch of Goupil.

First visit to Paris.

1875

Transferred to Paris.

1876

Dismissed by Boussod & Valadon, which succeeded Goupil & Cie. Becomes a teacher and then an assistant preacher in England.

1877

Moves to Amsterdam to study theology.

1878

Gives up his studies. Moves to the Borinage coal-mining region in the south of Belgium to do evangelical work.

1880

Decides to become an artist. Studies at the Brussels Academy for nine months.

Theo begins helping him financially.



Vincent van Gogh, age eighteen.

188

Moves to live with his parents in Etten in North Brabant.

In late November moves to The Hague to study with painter Anton Mauve.

1882

Liaison with prostitute Sien Hoornik.

First oil paintings.

1883

Breaks off with Sien.

Moves to the village of Nuenen, in North Brabant, to live with his parents.



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Letter from Vincent to Theo, c. 11 April 1885 (with sketch after "Study for the Potato Eaters").

1885

Death of his father.

Enrolls for a few months at the academy in Antwerp.

1886

Moves to Paris, where he lives with his brother.

Meets Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin.

1887

Organizes an exhibition of Japanese woodcuts at the Café du Tambourin.

Meets Seurat.

1888

In February, moves to Arles in Provence.

In October, Gauguin visits him.

During a mental breakdown (probably an epileptic seizure), Van Gogh cuts off his left earlobe.

His paintings are included in the Salon des Indépendants, Paris.

1889

Enters the asylum of Saint-Rémy as a voluntary patient.

1890

In January, sells his first picture.

First article devoted to his work (enthusiastic).

In May, moves to Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris.

July 27: Shoots himself in the chest; dies two days later.

1891

Death of Theo.

1892

First retrospective exhibition in the Netherlands.



Map of Holland, Belgium, and France showing places where Van Gogh lived.

1893

First publication of Vincent's letters.

1910

First biography, by Julius Meier-Graefe.

1913

Margaret E. F. Irwin, How Many Miles to Babylon?, first novel inspired by Van Gogh's life.

1935

First Van Gogh exhibition in the United States (Museum of Modern Art, New York).

1937

Irving Stone, *Lust for Life:* The Novel of Vincent van Gogh, best-seller on the life of Van Gogh.

1956

Lust for Life, first screen drama (by Vincente Minelli, starring Kirk Douglas), based on Stone's novel.

1973

Opening of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

SUNDAY LECTURES

2:00 p.m., East Building, large auditorium

October 4 Troubled Skies: Van Gogh's Last Paintings John Leighton, director, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

October 18
Dear Theo, Thank You For The
Paints: Vincent van Gogh's
Materials, His Technique and
the Presentation of Paintings
Ann Hoenigswald, paintings
conservator, National Gallery
of Art

October 25
Picturing the Painter:
Self-Portraits and the
Professional Self
Carol Zemel, professor of art
history, State University of
New York, Buffalo

November 1 Van Gogh's Portrait of Dr. Gachet: "The Heartbroken Expression of Our Time" Cynthia Saltzman, independent scholar, New York

December 13
Was Van Gogh a Misunderstood
Artist? His Own Ideas and
What Happened After His
Death
Louis van Tilborgh, chief
curator, Van Gogh Museum,
Amsterdam

LECTURE SERIES

Approaches to Van Gogh Tuesdays and Saturdays at noon, East Building, large auditorium

A six-part lecture series by National Gallery of Art staff.

October 6 and 10
Van Gogh and His Sources,
Eric Denker

October 13 and 17 Van Gogh's Self-Portraits, Frances Feldman

October 20 and 24 Van Gogh in Holland and Paris, Russell Sale

October 27 and 31

Van Gogh's Flowers, Philip

Leonard

November 3 and 7 Van Gogh in Arles, Wilford W. Scott

November 10 and 14 *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy*, Faya Causey, and *Van Gogh in Auvers*, Lynn Russell

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

East Building, large auditorium

Slide overviews of the exhibition by staff lecturers. For dates and times, please consult the Calendar of Events at the Art Information Desk, or call (202) 842-6706. Reservations are not required.

AUDIO TOUR

An INFORM® audio tour, narrated by Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery, and John Leighton, director, Van Gogh Museum, may be rented by visitors with passes to the exhibition in the East Sculpture Hall of the West Building. \$5.00 (\$4.00 for senior citizens and students). Scripts are available to visitors with hearing impairments. For more information, call (202) 842-6592.

FILMS

East Building, large auditorium

A series of biographical and documentary films on the artist will be shown on selected weekdays between October 14 and December 31. Among the films to be shown are Vincent: The Life and Death of Vincent van Gogh (Paul Cox, 1987); Vincent and Theo (Robert Altman, 1990); Vincent van Gogh (Maurice Pialat, 1991); and In a Brilliant Light: Van Gogh in Arles (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984). For more information and show times, please consult the Calendar of Events or Film Calendar or call (202) 842-6799.

EVENING WITH EDUCATORS

4:30–7:30 p.m., Wednesday, November 18

This after-hours program for educators includes a slide lecture and viewing of the exhibition. Held in conjunction with the Kennedy Center, the program is open to teachers of all subjects K-12. Advance registration and a fee of \$20 are required. For more information, call (202) 842-6796.

TEACHING PROGRAM

Vincent van Gogh (#065) Slides and commentary on Van Gogh's artistic development, with teaching activities. Available on a free-loan basis. Write the department of education resources, extension programs section, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC 20565.

CONCERT

Sunday, October 4, 7:00–8:30 p.m., West Building, West Garden Court

A special program of music by composers who were Van Gogh's contemporaries, including Richard Wagner, Gabriel Fauré, and César Franck, performed by the National Gallery Orchestra conducted by George Manos. Admission is on a first-come, first-served basis, beginning at 6:00 p.m. The entrance at Constitution Avenue and 6th Street remains open on Sundays from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. For more information, call (202) 842-6698.

CATALOGUE

Van Gogh's Van Goghs, by Richard Kendall, with contributions by John Leighton and Sjraar van Heugten, published by the National Gallery of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 160 pages, 89 color and 44 black and white illustrations, available from the Gallery Shops for \$25.00 (softbound), \$37.50 (hardbound). For information on ordering the catalogue by mail, call (800) 697-9350 or (301) 322-5900.

GENERAL

Passes are required for *Van Gogh's Van Goghs*. For information on obtaining passes, call (202) 789-4998 or (202) 737-4215; TDD line (202) 842-6176.

The National Gallery of Art is open Monday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Sunday, 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign language interpretation, and other services, please inquire at the Art Information Desks or call (202) 842-6690; TDD line (202) 842-6176. The National Gallery of Art's Web site can be accessed at http://www.nga.gov. Admission to the National Gallery of Art and to all of its programs is free except as noted.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Brochure written by Isabelle Dervaux, department of exhibition programs, and produced by the editors office. © 1998 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

A large-print version of this brochure is available at the entrance to the exhibition at the audio tour desk or from the West Building Main Floor Art Information Desk.

Cover: no. 39. Self-portrait as an Artist (detail), January 1888

Photos: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)